

The invention in which an exclusive right is claimed is defined by the following:

1. A method for enabling a user who has signed onto an online gaming service over a network to immediately join play of an online game in which a friend is playing, comprising the steps of:

(a) providing a control that is selectively activatable by the user to immediately couple the user in communication with an instance of the online game in which a friend is playing;

(b) providing a list of friends of the user, said list including an identification of each of the friends of the user and of a friend currently playing the online game; and

(c) in response to the user activating the control that was indicated, immediately connecting the user to the instance of the online game in which the friend is playing, so that the user can participate in playing said online game.

2. The method of Claim 1, further comprising the steps of:

(a) displaying the list of friends to the user; and

(b) enabling the user to select the friend playing the online game from the list before activating the control that was provided, so that the user is immediately connected to the instance of the online game in which the friend selected by the user is playing.

3. The method of Claim 1, further comprising the step of automatically searching for a first friend within the friends list, who is playing the online game, so that the user is immediately connected to the instance of the online game in which the first friend found by searching is playing.

4. The method of Claim 3, wherein the step of providing the control comprises the step of making the control available to be selectively activated by the user immediately after the user has signed onto a gaming service that is employed to connect players in an online game.

5. The method of Claim 3, wherein the friends list of the user is transferred from the gaming service to a game console of the user when the user signs onto the gaming service.

6. The method of Claim 5, wherein the online game that is loaded by the user into the game console of the user carries out the step of providing the control that can be selectively activated by the user to immediately couple the user in communication with an instance of the online game.

7. The method of Claim 1, wherein the step of immediately connecting the user to the instance of the online game comprises the step of opening a screen within the instance of the online game displaying options related to playing the online game.

8. The method of Claim 1, wherein the step of immediately connecting the user to the instance of the online game comprises the step of opening a screen within the instance of the online game so that the user is immediately playing the online game.

9. The method of Claim 1, wherein the control for immediately connecting to an online game being played by a friend is made selectively activatable by the user at a plurality of different times after the user signs onto a gaming service to play the online game.

10. The method of Claim 9, wherein one of the times at which the control is selectively activatable is after the user has selected a friend on the list of friends who is playing the online game, so that by selectively activating the control, the user is immediately connected to the instance of the online game being played by the friend who was selected.

11. The method of Claim 10, wherein each friend in the list of friends of the user is indicated by a Gamertag that is unique to the friend.

12. A memory medium on which are stored machine readable instructions for carrying out the steps of Claim 1.

13. A method for enabling a user to selectively join an online game that is being played over a network by a friend of the user, comprising the steps of:

- (a) enabling the user to connect to a gaming service that facilitates joining a plurality of users in playing instances of online games;
- (b) in response to the user connecting with and signing into the gaming service, providing a selectable control option that will immediately join the user to an instance of the online game in which a friend of the user is playing; and
- (c) in response to the user selectively activating the control option, causing the gaming service to immediately join the user into the instance of the online game being played by the friend.

14. The method of Claim 13, further comprising the step of displaying a friends list that indicates friends of the user who play online games using the gaming service and indicates any friend of the user who is currently playing the online game.

15. The method of Claim 14, further comprising the step of enabling the user to select a friend who is currently connected to the gaming service and is playing the online game from the friends list, so that in response to the user selectively activating the control option, the user is immediately joined in playing the online game being played by the friend who was selected.

16. The method of Claim 13, wherein software executed to play the online game enables the control option to be activated to the user and causes the gaming service to immediately join the user in the instance of the online game when the control option is selectively activated by the user.

17. The method of Claim 14, wherein the user is immediately joined in the online game being played by a first friend of the user who has been automatically identified in the friends list of the of the user as currently playing the online game.

18. The method of Claim 13, further comprising the step of determining the online game with which the user will be joined based upon an online game software employed by the user for connecting to and signing onto the gaming service.

19. A memory medium on which are stored machine readable instructions for carrying out the steps of Claim 13.

20. A game console that enables a user who has signed onto an online gaming service over a network, to immediately join play of an online game in which a friend is playing, comprising:

(a) a network interface that is adapted to couple the gaming console to a network for communicating with the gaming service and with other game consoles;

(b) a display interface adapted to couple to a display for displaying graphic and textual data;

(c) a user input device for input and control of online games being played using the game console;

(d) a memory that stores machine instructions; and

(e) a processor that is coupled to the network interface, the display interface memory, the user input device, and the memory, said processor executing the machine instructions stored in the memory to carry out a plurality of functions, including:

(i) providing a control that is selectively activatable by the user using the user input device to immediately join the user in communication with an instance of the online game in which a friend is playing;

(ii) providing a list of friends of the user, said list identifying friends of the user who play online games and indicating a friend of the user on the list who is currently playing the online game; and

(iii) in response to the user activating the control that was provided, immediately connecting the user to the instance of the online game in which the friend is playing, so that the user can participate in playing said online game with the friend.

21. The game console of Claim 20, wherein the machine instructions cause the processor to:

- (a) display the list of friends to the user; and
- (b) enable the user to employ the user input device to select the friend playing the online game from the list before activating the control, so that the user is immediately connected to the instance of the online game in which the friend selected by the user is playing.

22. The game console of Claim 20, wherein the machine instructions cause the processor to automatically search for a first friend who is playing the online game, within the friends list, so that the user is immediately connected to the instance of the online game in which the first friend is playing.

23. The game console of Claim 22, wherein the machine instructions cause the processor to provide the control immediately after the user has signed onto a gaming service that is employed to connect players in playing an online game.

24. The game console of Claim 22, wherein the friends list of the user is transferred from the gaming service to the game console of the user when the user signs onto the gaming service, to enable a friend who is playing the online game to be identified on the friends list of the user.

25. The game console of Claim 24, wherein the software comprising the online game that is loaded into the memory of the game console carries out the step of responding to the control that can be selectively activated by the user to immediately join the user in communication with an instance of the online game being played by the friend.

26. The game console of Claim 20, wherein when the user is immediately connected to the instance of the online game, the machine instructions cause a screen to be displayed within the instance of the online game, said screen displaying options related to playing the online game.

27. The game console of Claim 20, wherein when the user is immediately connected to the instance of the online game, the machine instructions cause a screen within the instance of the online game to be opened and displayed, so that the user is immediately playing the online game.

28. The game console of Claim 20, wherein the control for immediately connecting to an online game being played by a friend is selectively activatable by the user at a plurality of different times after the user has signed onto a gaming service to play the online game.

29. The game console of Claim 28, wherein one of the times at which the control is selectively activatable is after the user has selected a friend on the list who is playing the online game, so that by selectively activating the control, the user is immediately connected to the instance of the online game being played by the friend who was selected.

30. The game console of Claim 29, wherein each friend on the friends list of the user is indicated by a Gamertag that is unique to the friend.